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School Counselors and School Librarians: Innovative Leaders in Partnerships Promoting Student  
Mental Health with Online Resources

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary middle and high school students are coming to school with more extensive and more serious mental health issues than ever before. School counselors are charged with trying to meet the social/emotional and mental health needs of these students, but with case loads topping 300+ students they struggle to have time to identify and prepare curriculum and materials that will serve to educate students about positive mental, social/emotional health. Additionally, many practicing school counselors lack the skills necessary for developing web-based portals for sharing information in ways technology-savvy teens most often access. School librarians, technology-competent professionals, can be powerful collaborative partners in the efforts of school counselors to prepare and compile educational resources and information to support the social/emotional and mental health of high school students. This manuscript will describe a collaborative partnership between the school librarian and school counselor to prepare a counseling program website with resources and educational materials specifically focused on positive mental and social/emotional health for teens. Key tenets of professional preparedness, possibilities and the process of interdisciplinary collaboration for school counselors and school librarians seeking to develop partnerships such as the one described will be shared.

*Keywords:* Course/Instructional Design, Distance Education, Interdisciplinary Partnerships, Roles of Counselors and Librarians

**School Counselors and School Librarians: Innovative Leaders in Partnerships Promoting Student Mental Health with Online Resources**

Bullying (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001), depression and anxiety, nutrition and physical health, peer relationships (Jaycox, et al., 2009), substance abuse (Cuellar, Markowitz & Libby, 2004), pregnancy (Harden, et al., 2007), sexual health (Kalmuss, Davidson, Cohall, Laraque, & Cassell, 2003), eating disorders and relational aggression (Crenshaw & Lee, 2010) provide just a brief overview of the issues impacting the mental health of teens and adolescents. As these young people enter middle and secondary schools, they are held to rigorous academic standards, often with little support for mental health issues which may impede their learning (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). The professional charged with meeting the social/emotional mental health needs of students, the school counselor, is often overburdened with counseling-related and non-counseling tasks such as registration and testing. Consequently, the mental health needs of many students go unaddressed and students struggle to be academically successful (Dollarhide, Saginak, & Urofsky, 2008; Roeser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999).

In a perfect world, school counselors would be able to forgo many of the non-counseling related tasks associated with current school counseling practice and focus solely on the personal/social, academic and career development of their students. Though as a profession, school counseling has made dramatic positive strides in this direction in recent years, the reality for many practicing school counselors is that they must struggle to balance a myriad of sometimes conflicting professional responsibilities and administrator expectations. Collaborative interdisciplinary partnerships provide a vehicle for harnessing resources readily available in the

school counselor's learning community to fulfill their most important professional responsibility, the responsibility to support and promote the academic success and mental health of students.

This chapter describes one such partnership between school librarians and school counselors. The digital age has transformed the work of school counselors and school librarians in ways responsive to the digital knowledge and competencies of today's youth. Thus, the partnership presented in this discussion will illuminate the process of developing an interdisciplinary partnership that fulfills the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner (2007) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2005) mandates and ultimately results in the development of a website to share resources to meet the social/emotional mental health needs of teens.

In the partnership described, the school counselor and school librarian team together to work with high school students to identify, evaluate and compile resources to support and promote the mental health of teens. In the proposed partnership, the school librarian's expertise in the areas of information literacy and media management and AASL's mandate to prepare students for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning will serve as critical resources for the school counselor seeking to develop a school counseling program website including mental health components.

### **Bridging the Digital Divide**

Though the counseling profession has forged ahead into the information age, many practicing school counselors still lack technological competencies necessary for creating and facilitating web-based services and resources for stakeholders. Conversely, contemporary students are highly competent with technology and most turn to the web to seek out needed information. Consequently, the digital divide existing between school counselors and their

student stakeholders can serve as a barrier to students approaching the counselor for help with mental health concerns.

Fortunately, the school counselor has a valuable ally in the school, the school librarian. The school librarian is well-versed in technology (AASL, 2009) and works closely with students throughout their school careers to ensure that students are using technology and Internet resources safely, effectively and appropriately (Dotson & Dotson-Blake, 2010). Additionally, information literacy and the process of identifying, locating and evaluating information and resources are key research and consumer skills that school librarians impart to their students (Taylor, 2006). The combination of technology competency and information literacy renders the school librarian an expert in working with students and colleagues, like the school counselor, to identify and plan for the utilization of electronic media and resources. The school librarian can serve as a bridge to span the digital divide between technology-savvy teens and their less technology-competent counselors.

### **Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Healthy, Successful Students: Preparedness,**

#### **Possibilities, Process**

Interdisciplinary collaboration provides opportunities for partnering the resources and expertise of multiple professionals to provide comprehensive programming to address students' needs. To fully understand the impact of interdisciplinary collaboration, consider for a minute the effect of turning a kaleidoscope as one looks through the lens. As a kaleidoscope is turned the transparent colored objects inside shift and move together as light filters through, reflecting off of and passing through the transparent objects to mirrors which reflect the amazing patterns that are viewed by those lucky enough to look through the lens (Kaleidoscopes of America, 2006).

With each rotation of the kaleidoscope, the unique colored transparent objects fall and move together in dynamic ways creating rich and exciting patterns. Taken from the group, each individual object is unable to provide the rich, complex patterns that emerge when it is placed together with other unique objects in the kaleidoscope. Interdisciplinary collaboration is much the same. By oneself, each education professional is only able to contribute her or his particular expertise in a concentrated effort. However when working in concert with other education professionals and their complementary expertise and resources, these professionals are able to provide results that are complex, comprehensive and readily able to meet the multifaceted needs of students and stakeholders.

### **Preparedness**

School librarians and school counselors are uniquely prepared to work in collaboration with other professionals. Professional consultation and collaboration are specific components of the national standards, which guide the education of pre-service school librarians and the practice of school librarians (AASL, 2007). In fact, AASL (2009) asserts that the school librarian's role as an instructional partner is essential to the future growth and progress of the profession. The ASCA National Model (2005), which guides the preparation and practice of school counselors, also includes specific mandates addressing the importance of collaboration and consultation with other educational professionals. Consequently, these professionals are professionally required to seek out and develop interdisciplinary partnerships to provide comprehensive services to students.

As a function of their training, as mandated by national standards, school librarians and school counselors have also been expertly prepared to design, implement and facilitate collaborative partnerships with other professionals. The four top roles of school librarians are

teacher, information specialist, instructional partner and program administrator (AASL, 2009). These roles serve as the foundation for the development of the partnership described in this chapter and most importantly, the critical work of the school librarian with students under the umbrellas of each of these roles is supported and enhanced by the described partnership. The described partnership provides a way to fulfill many of the Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner put forth by AASL (2009) in intentional and strategic ways to not only improve the academic outcomes of students, but also to improve and strengthen the overall school learning community.

### **Possibilities**

Though the professional training of school counselors and school librarians prepares them for collaborative partnerships, it may be difficult for on-the-job practitioners to conceptualize these partnerships. Some examples of possibilities for interdisciplinary collaborative partnerships include partnerships focused on curriculum development, partnerships focused on providing services to students and partnerships that seek to engage parents, families and/or community members in the education of students. Other partnership opportunities certainly exist and a detailed exploration of as many partnership possibilities as possible would be helpful to practicing school librarians and school counselors seeking to develop collaborative partnerships in their schools. Though such a discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, one example of a potential partnership between the school librarian and school counselor will be explored in-depth. The intent of the authors is that by exploring this partnership possibility in detail, practicing school librarians and school counselors can use this chapter as a blueprint for implementing similar partnerships in their schools. As such, this chapter presents a case study

exploring a dynamic partnership between a school librarian and school counselor to address the mental health needs of students.

### **Process**

There are a few critical process components that must be included for an interdisciplinary partnership between the school librarian and school counselor to be successful. These components include open communication, flexibility, shared vision, common goals, respect and trust. Muronago and Harada (1999) asserted that for interdisciplinary collaboration to be successful, the professionals involved must develop a shared vision for their collaboration and define goals for their work, while most importantly maintaining a context of respect and trust upon which to build their partnership. These are critically important building blocks for partnerships between school librarians and school counselors. Though turf-wars are prevalent in school communities (McKerrow, Dunn & Killian, 2003), professionals seeking to engage in successful collaborative partnerships must be willing to set-aside territorial demarcations of responsibilities and roles and must embrace a process of leadership and effort that includes evolving and shifting roles and engagement. The case presented in this chapter has been developed with recognition of the importance of these foundational process-focused building blocks.

### **Case Example**

School librarians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek to provide a diverse and supportive learning environment for all students and faculty, while school counselors offer supportive services from a similar, but different perspective. In their respective quests, both, appreciate and realize the significance of information seeking, the process by which one may gain valid information for meeting a range of needs effectively (Udoh, 1998).



Currently, though school counselors value the importance of information seeking and resource sharing, they often do not have sufficient time to devote to these tasks because of other responsibilities. On the other hand, school librarians devote much of their time to teaching students information-seeking and how to gain knowledge through inquiry and critical thinking, as indicated by the AASL ranking the teaching role of these professionals first in their current roles in school settings (AASL, 2009).

Often school librarians seek to create assignments to encourage students to explore available resources, draw conclusions from the resources they uncover and apply the knowledge they have gained in real-life scenarios, as encouraged by the common beliefs inherent in the Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners (AASL, 2009). The elaborate real-life scenarios for assignments that school librarians create are quite helpful for student learners. However, consider the potential impact of using these assignments to encourage students to address real-life concerns of their particular school and stakeholder group. Each assignment the students complete could have direct, positive impacts on their learning community, promoting the students' understanding of the social context of learning (AASL, 2009) and the power of their personal engagement.

This case details a partnership that fulfills the vision of developing meaningful student assignments to address current needs of the students' school community. The partnership utilizes the school librarian's expertise in information seeking, technology competency and lessons with students to identify resources and compile this information into a counseling department website to share mental health and social/emotional support resources with students and stakeholders.

### **School Librarian Standards Addressed By the Case**

The Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners (AASL, 2007) set forth by the American Association of School Librarians denoted four primary standards that school librarians must work to encourage their students to develop:

1. Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge
2. Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations and create new knowledge
3. Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society
4. Pursue personal and aesthetic growth

This case will include components that fulfill each of these standards and will include student outcomes that can be documented as support towards the school library program's fulfillment of each of these standards.

### **Laying the Foundation**

The first step in this collaborative partnership is to have the school counselor and school librarian meet to define the goals and objectives of this partnership. During this meeting, the school counselor shares information with the school librarian regarding the prevalent mental health issues facing students in their school. The school librarian articulates the process she/he will follow for working with the students to identify potentially useful resources and the two professionals develop a plan for meeting again to assess the progress of the students in identifying and compiling resource information.

### **Initiating Student Involvement**

Following her/his meeting with the school counselor, the school librarian works with students to describe the project they will be embarking upon. She/he explains the purpose of the

project and provides critical linkages to academic expectations for the students. Students are encouraged to ask questions about the project and their feedback is sought about the topics they will be researching. It is helpful to have the school counselor involved in this component of the discussion, in order to integrate the students' feedback into current programming addressing mental and social/emotional issues facing students. The inquiry component of this step in the partnership involves having the students consider thoughtfully the mental health issues presented by the school counselor and provide feedback about their perceptions of the importance of these issues for students in their school community. This inquiry can be documented by having the students submit a one-page reflection considering the topics that were presented to them. These reflections can provide powerful information for the school librarian and the school counselor to use in shaping the project to meet the developmental needs of the students.

### **Inquiry and Critical Evaluation of Print Resources**

The next action step of this partnership is to review current school library holdings. The school librarian will work with a group of students to review the school library's current collection and analyze needs to meet the shared mission of both the counseling department and the library. In this systematic approach to assist the school counselor, students under the direction of the school librarian will begin the process by going through the media collection inventory to compile a list of resources currently held by the school library related to the mental health and social/emotional issues identified.

The students will provide initial, brief reviews of the relevance of the material presented in the resources for their school's student population. Students must critically consider the materials and make informed decisions about the appropriateness of these materials for meeting the needs of their peers, fulfilling standards one and two of the Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Learning (AASL, 2007). Following the student reviews, both the school counselor and school librarian will review the materials for currency and appropriate content and use, utilizing the student reviews as an important piece of information to inform their decision-making process.

In this manner several purposes are met. The ongoing evaluation and weeding process so essential to the work of the school librarian is intertwined with the lessons being taught. Deficits in the print collection can be identified. Ultimately, the school counselor will have an updated, current list of available resources on specific topics. Another benefit for the school library program is that the completed student reviews can serve as outcome evidence supporting the program's work towards the fulfillment of the Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning (AASL, 2007). Most importantly, however, is that students become more familiar with the library collection, and learn valuable information seeking skills in the process of completing the evaluation of print resources. As a community of learners, students, counselor and school librarian all benefit from this phase of the project (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007).

### **Inquiry and Critical Evaluation of Electronic Resources**

The next stage of the project development involves identifying and evaluating electronic resources related to the mental health issues specified. The possibilities are endless, but as students draw upon previously taught information evaluation skills, they will be able to select the most current and dependable resources from the enormous variety of materials available online. The school librarian has a fertile opportunity here to readdress, and reaffirm, information literacy searching techniques as students follow an inquiry-based process to connect academic learning with a real-life need. Students will identify, evaluate and select appropriate web resources to address the issues provided by the school counselor. Accuracy, validity and appropriateness are key concerns and are closely monitored by the school librarian.

Together, students will compile a list of the electronic resources they have identified and create brief reviews of the appropriateness of the material for use with their peer group. The review step of this stage in the project and the previous stage are critical for student learning. The Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners (AASL, 2007) stress the importance of inquiry, critical evaluation, and informed decision-making for contemporary students and the expectations for students at these two stages of the project seek to promote the development of these skills for students. Again, as in the previous stage of the project, the school librarian and school counselor will review the resources and the student reviews to critique each resource for appropriateness for meeting student and stakeholder needs. After this final professional critique, the school counselor and school librarian meet together to discuss the resources and choose the ones to include on the counseling department website. Once the professionals have decided which resources to include, students will begin the culmination of this project, the creation of the counseling department's website.

### **Creation of Website**

Each student will use his/her skills to assist in the creation of a final product. This product should be a website designed to present the resources identified along with other basic information, including, but not limited to the counselor's contact information and a calendar that can be updated to include scholarship deadlines and other important dates, on the school counselor's website. Students can be allowed to work individually or in teams for this stage of the project. After each student (or group of students) completes a proposed website, students will present their website designs to their classmates and the school librarian. This presentation will encourage students to reflect on their work and participate collaboratively in the process of reviewing and critiquing each other's work. These presentations should be viewed as a time for

sharing knowledge and celebrating learning, while working together to choose the most creative, professional elements of each web-design to incorporate into a final, comprehensive website.

The development of the final, comprehensive website should draw from aspects of the presented websites and should encourage students to work together to develop a strong and effective final product. The shared interchange of ideas and skills will result in a creative, artistic, and informative tool the school counselor can use for the benefit of the greater school community.

The individual or team-created websites can serve as evidence of the fulfillment of the standard focused on applying knowledge and creating new knowledge (AASL, 2007). The final comprehensive website created collaboratively by the class provides a wonderful example of students working together to share knowledge and actively engage as members of a strong democratic society (AASL, 2007). Extending beyond the documentation of work towards achieving the standards, these websites serve as evidence of the students' ability to work together to address a pressing need in their school community. This achievement will, in turn, promote a sense of personal investment in learning for students, which may extend the benefits of this project for student learning far beyond the school library and school counseling program. This final benefit solidly assures the fulfillment of the final standard, the pursuit of growth in the areas of learning and motivation for learning (AASL, 2007).

### **Extensions of the Project**

There are many ways to extend the proposed partnership to continue to develop technology-based resources for students and improve the information literacy of students. One potential extension is to have the school librarian lead students in the creation of open-access communication tools to allow students to pose mental health questions for the counselor and encourage student/faculty dialogue about difficult social/emotional student concerns. Students

could use a range of available, accessible technology to design blogs or wikis appropriate for sharing information, promoting discourse among stakeholders and eliciting feedback from students. These blogs or wikis could be used to elicit questions and provide feedback about current issues, allowing the school counselor to keep a finger on the pulse of the student population's mental health and level of awareness at all times.

Another potential extension of this partnership is to have students prepare presentations or wiki pages sharing brief information about different mental health concerns impacting students in their school. These wikis could provide students with limited, professionally-screened information to increase student awareness of mental health concerns and share links to resources providing further information. The students could include presentations on their wikis that share a compilation of the information about the wiki topic that they gained through the use of their information literacy skills. Additionally, the wikis could include brief surveys to assess students' knowledge of the focused concern or perceptions of the importance and relevance of the information shared on the wiki to provide the school counselor with feedback to use in program planning and curriculum development.

Many more extensions of the partnership certainly exist. The developmental levels and abilities of students must be considered to effectively extend the partnership in ways appropriate for the reader's school and student population. These two are offered to spark readers' consideration of the possibilities for continued partnership work.

## **Conclusion**

This comprehensive collaborative partnership addresses the professional mandate for school librarians to promote the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills in students. In fulfilling this mandate through a partnership with the school counselor, the strategies for

promoting the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills can be used to also meet the mental health and social/emotional needs of students. Instead of working in isolation on similar goals, the collaborative partnership of the two programs results in meaningful learning with the creation of a positive product. The students who helped the website to become a reality can take pride in their service to the school community and rely on their skills gained in all future endeavors, knowing that they, individually, are able to make a significant contribution to the success of the larger community. It is hoped that through this partnership, students will realize the importance of identifying a need, devising a plan to meet that need, and most importantly, working together for a positive end result in an effective learning community.



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